

Reception Mechanisms in the New Media Sphere: Specificities and Issues



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Abstract

Media discourse is inherently dependent on the audience's responsiveness and their ability to grasp the conveyed meanings. Regardless of the sender's linguistic choices and symbolic-semantic resources, the communication process must be adapted to the perceived characteristics of the audience. Consequently, understanding how audiences interpret media discourse has become a focal point of media studies.

This has led to a particular emphasis on the study of meaning attribution, reception processes, and "encoding-decoding process" The central inquiry in this domain is whether the audience is required to interpret messages in the same way intended by the sender.

This study delves into the dynamics of reception process of media contents, focusing specifically on reception dynamics on the new media sphere, by investigating the meanings of "the reception theory", its philosophical and cognitive context, then reception's challenging in the new media sphere.

Keywords

Reception;
Interpretation;
Reception Theory;
Media Reception;
New media sphere.

الكلمات المفتاحية

تلقي ؛
تأويل ؛
نظرية التلقي ؛
تلقي إعلامي ؛
بيئة الوسائط الجديدة.

آليات التلقي في بيئة الاتصال الوسائطي: الخصوصية والإشكالات

ملخص

يعتمد الخطاب الإعلامي بطبيعته على مدى استجابة الجمهور وقدرته على استيعاب المعاني المرسل. وبغض النظر عن الثراء اللغوي والرمزي للمرسل، يجب أن تتكيف عملية الاتصال مع الخصائص المتصورة للجمهور. من هنا أصبح فهم كيفية تأويل الجمهور للخطاب الإعلامي نقطة محورية في الدراسات الإعلامية. وقد أدى ذلك إلى التركيز بشكل خاص على دراسات "إضفاء المعنى"، وعمليات التلقي، و"عملية فك الترميز". والسؤال المركزي في هذا المجال هو ما إذا كان الجمهور مطالبًا بتفسير الرسائل الإعلامية بالطريقة نفسها التي يقصدها المرسل.

تتعمق هذه الدراسة في ديناميكيات عملية تلقي المضامين الإعلامية، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على ديناميكيات التلقي في بيئة الوسائط الجديدة، من خلال البحث في معاني "نظرية التلقي"، وسياقاتها الفلسفية والمعرفية، ثم إشكالات التلقي في البيئة الوسائطية الجديدة.

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I. Introduction :

The social construction of media audiences, as defined by media and communication theories and researches, constitutes a distinctive field of knowledge with theoretical, philosophical, political, and epistemological dimensions that are engaged fundamentally in describing the complex and intertwined relationship between individuals and media or cultural content.

For the reason that the audience is a highly dynamic and intricate concept, it has consistently been a focal point of media and communication studies, which have explored various perspectives on how audiences engage with media content. Sometimes the audience is viewed as passive and susceptible to manipulation and misinformation, while at other times it is seen as active and responsive in interpreting media messages in diverse ways and reacting in ways that may not align with the sender's intentions. Often, audiences select messages that align with their needs, requirements, and desires.

In this context, recent trends in audience studies have emphasized on the "reception process" as a means of understanding how audiences construct meaning from media messages. This approach involves exploring how individuals produce their own interpretations of media messages based on their social, cultural, economic backgrounds and media imaginary. This perspective views the reception of media messages as an active and complex process, granting greater "authority" to the receiver compared to the sender. In contrast to the authority of the medium or the text, reception studies focus on the "authority of the receiver," who decodes media messages as the "true actor" in meaning production.

Considering the transformations brought about by the media communication sphere, which has introduced a virtual dimension differing from traditional communication systems, this environment facilitates extensive, multi-directional networked communications. In this space, individuals continuously shift between sending and receiving roles. This virtual environment represents a new communicative model that is not centered on a single transmission but is characterized by interactive participation, where every individual (sender/receiver) contributes to its discovery, alteration, or preservation.

Given these modifications in the media communication environment, questions have arisen about the "adaptation of reception theory" to study the new media uses and its appropriateness (reception theory) for analyzing phenomena in new media spaces. Specifically, the inquiry is whether reception theory, which was developed to study audiences of mass media, particularly television, in an analog technology environment, can be extended to digital media. (Livingstone, 2004)

Thus, the study of reception in the new media sphere, including new forms and mechanisms of receiving media and communication content in virtual spaces, is a research approach of significant importance. This is in light of the several changes brought about by the development and use of new media, which have created virtual communication spaces that transcend the dimensions of traditional communication processes and interweave roles and interactions.

From this perspective, this research paper aims to contribute to the discussion on the new forms and mechanisms of reception in the new media environment by examining the specifics of reception in this virtual context, its issues and problematic.

II. "Reception" Meanings: Definition of the Concept.

The term "reception" carries a great deal of complexity (El-Iyadi, 2021) due to its affiliation with various disciplines: anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, literary criticism, and media and communication studies. It has evolved into a central concept for studying audiences of television, radio, newspapers, digital platforms, internet, theater, cinema, literature, and other creative and artistic fields.

The concept of "reception," etymologically related with German literary theory, presents several issues regarding its original language "Germany" and the languages into which it has been translated to. It often overlaps with closely related concepts such as "consumption," which pertains to the consumption of cultural and media content, and "exposure" to media from a functionalist perspective. Additionally, it intersects with concepts like "response," "influence," which are similar in meaning but differ in symbolic and conceptual connotations.

Reception is frequently associated with the act of "reading." In this context, Robert C. Holub, a prominent scholar in reception theory, highlights the confusion surrounding the term. Holub notes (Holub 1984) that "The term 'reception theory' seems foreign to English speakers, as they are not accustomed to it. As Hans Robert Jauss, a pioneer of the theory, pointed out, 'To the foreign ear, the term reception might seem more appropriate for running a hotel than

for literature." However, for those familiar with the German critical scene, the term "reception," whether in its standalone form or in its various compound forms, has represented a key theoretical focus over the past decade and a half, impacting many fields such as sociology and art history.

Although definitions of reception vary as an action or as a cultural or social practice, they all converge on the idea that reception is "a distinctly cultural act" representing the moment when the meanings of a text are formed within the audience. As a concept, reception refers to the way in which works by an author, school, or movement are engaged with. In this sense, reception is the process through which a reader—considered as a being with psychological, cognitive, emotional, and social components—interprets literary and artistic works. The term "reception" is also used to denote theories related to the reception of literary and artistic works (Boukrouh, 2011)

III. Reception Theory... Epistemological and Philosophical Grounding

Reception theory, in its early stages, was influenced by the political, economic, and cultural conditions prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, which fostered philosophical and intellectual currents that contributed to its development. Reception theory did not emerge in isolation; rather, it is a critical theory with epistemological origins and philosophical references.

The phenomenological and hermeneutic philosophies had a significant impact on the foundation of the theory. Many concepts introduced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, particularly those from key figures like Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden, evolved into theoretical foundations and procedural concepts. Notably, the concepts of transcendence and intentionality were influential in reception theory. Additionally, pioneers of reception theory drew on the ideas of philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and his students regarding interpretation and the legitimate role of the recipient in meaning-making as an active participant in the understanding process. This process involves projecting our inner lives onto external objects to experience the reflection of our experiences (Belghithia, 2022).

Moreover, scholars in the field of cultural sociology have engaged with reception as a combination of psychological, social, and cultural imaginaries that distinguish different audiences. The field of "sociology of reception" (*sociologie de la réception*), which examines the reception of cultural products such as media content, theatrical pieces, or literary texts, has marked many studies analyzing the relationship between media, culture, and power. Cultural hegemony and popular culture studies have been central to the issues of cultural consumption and reception (Migret, 2015).

In addition to cultural sociology, the reception of media content (interpretation and meaning construction) has been a central focus of cultural studies. This approach represents a significant cultural methodology that seeks to understand communicative acts by interpreting the cultural and communicative relationships between audiences and media content. It challenges the notion of media dominance over audiences by shifting focus from the sender and the message to the receiver and their context of reception, thereby freeing media studies from the constraints of influence and placing it in a broader perspective of audience autonomy and their role in meaning production.

Academically, reception theory is traced back to the late 1960s in Germany, by Professors Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser from the University of Constance. Their work emerged as part of a theoretical approach aimed at describing and analyzing literary texts from multiple perspectives, in order to skip of external methods focused on "the real" such as Marxism, dialectical realism, or biographical approaches that concentrated on the creator's life and historical circumstances. They also addressed traditional approaches focused on extracting meaning from texts as part of knowledge and absolute truth, as well as structuralist methods that neglected the active role of the reader in literary communication.

In this regard, the concept of "reception" became a focal point for addressing questions about audiences, starting with the Constance School and the work of Jauss and Iser on "aesthetics of reception" as a response to critical theory in the 1970s. Jauss, in particular, explored the pleasure in different reading patterns and the idea of the "horizon of expectations" of a text: its specific stylistic requirements and the personal horizon of the reader: their social and individual world (Migret, 2015).

Thus, the pioneers of reception theory at the University of Constance played a pioneering role in proposing methodological solutions to the crisis in cultural and literary research. They advocated for a re-evaluation of methodologies that no longer met the needs of literary and artistic research, emphasizing that reception theory represents a new model for reading literary and artistic works through diverse concepts and strategies. This model includes the "horizon of expectations," which encourages viewing texts and artistic performances in a broader historical context, and the concepts of "interaction" and "the reading event" which indicate the foundations of these approaches as generating reading experiences between the reader and the text (Boukrouh, 2011).

Moreover, Reception studies share with hermeneutic approaches the premise that the meaning of a message - and all forms of media messages—is not fixed or predetermined but must be interpreted by receivers. In this context, John Fiske is a key reference in reception studies through his book "Television Culture" (1987), where he argues that "meaning" arises fundamentally from the independent and interconnected interaction between "context, the polysemic text, and the interpreting reader" (Livingstone, Das, 2013).

On another front, Umberto Eco is a prominent theorist of reception in semiotics, viewing interpretation and reception as processes of meaning construction centered around text interactions. According to Eco, texts are understood to signify an "ideal" or "implied" reader, while empirical readers decode texts in accordance with their specific knowledge and interests shaped by their social context. This approach represents more than just a theoretical assumption for reception studies; it also raises empirical research questions. Reception studies focus on "interpretation" as a collective process within interpretive communities, differing across various audience groups (Das, 2013).

Despite the diverse theoretical, intellectual, and philosophical perspectives explored in reception theory, they all converge on the significant role of the receiver in the complex fabric of cultural, artistic, and communicative processes. This perspective transcends earlier views that regarded the reader as a marginal element, emphasizing instead their capacity to retain and express their individuality through reading and interpretation.

IV. Reception Theory in Media and Communication Research

Although some scholars trace the origins of media reception studies to Richard Hoggart's 1957 book "The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life" which rejected the dominant view of the overwhelming influence of cultural industries on working-class audiences in Britain, other researchers (Al-Iyadi, 2021) argue that the actual development of media reception theory began in the 1970s with the British sociologist Stuart Hall (the pioneer of Cultural studies). Hall's model of encoding and decoding demonstrated that the meanings that audiences derive from media content do not necessarily align with the intentions of media producers, suggesting that interpretations may be altered according to the contexts of reception and the social, cultural, and political backgrounds of the receivers, hence the production and the reproduction of meanings are process that manifested in various levels (macro-level / meso-level / and micro-level) as part of a dynamic and mutual reinforcing circle.

Hall's approach is situated within broader of "Cultural Studies" efforts to understand and interpret communicative acts critically within their cultural and social contexts, focusing on the processes of meaning-making and the encoding/decoding of messages. Cultural studies view all texts as subjects to multiple readings. Thus, media reception research aligns with these perspectives by exploring how audiences assign their own meanings to media messages. Stuart Hall's study of television discourse was a pioneering work in analyzing patterns of message reception—symbols and meanings—and their interpretation based on cultural and social contexts (Hall, 1994). Cultural studies' significant contribution involves textual analysis and audience studies within the context of television as a socially and culturally formative activity, emphasizing the interaction between media content and audiences.

Stuart Hall identified significant differences in the interpretation of media texts due to the social and cultural factors shaping the cultural system. This approach contrasts with earlier literature that often conceptualized communication as a one-way process: sender → message → receiver. Hall proposed that communication is not linear; instead, the receiver can introduce new modifications to the message according to the following model (Hall, 1994):

Production – transmission-distribution- consumption- reproduction

In this context, media content is understood as polysemic texts, where only some meanings are adopted by viewers. Consequently, audience diversity interacts with textual meanings, with audiences seen as active creators of meaning in relation to texts. This process is based on pre-existing cultural competencies and is framed within linguistic contexts and social relationships (Belkacem, 2018).

A number of researchers in the field of Cultural Studies, including David Morley, have extensively studied reception and audiences. Morley dedicated several works to examining the textual dimensions of television viewing, incorporating social dimensions into the analysis and placing greater emphasis on reader interpretations. He replaced the concept of decoding with "viewing context" to understand how different viewers use television actively and integrally within their culture. This includes how they interpret television content according to their identities and social experiences, and how they contribute to the social creation of media products through their interpretations. David Morley specifically investigated decoding processes within the domestic context, analyzing family communication structures, where daily television viewing and consumption take place (Dayan, 1993).

Sonia Livingstone has provided three key insights for understanding media reception studies (Al-Iyadi, 2021):

1. "Indeterminate Interpretations" It is not possible to predict what a reader will derive from a text based solely on knowledge of the text itself. This implies not only that a text does not have a single fixed meaning, but also that empirical readers might interpret the text critically, recreationally, or creatively. Readers may circumvent the meaning intended by the text, resist the inherent meaning, or appropriate the symbols and signs within television drama in a multicultural context. These situations deepen our understanding of the concept of "social circulation of meaning" and the phenomenon of "social construction of interpretations."

2. "Exploring Multicultural Audiences" Media reception studies have opened horizons for exploring empirically diverse, culturally, and anthropologically varied audiences that interpret media and cultural material within specific social contexts. This approach challenges the purported ideological dominance exercised by media institutions.

3. "Focus on Contextualization" The studies about "Reception" have offered significant emphasis on "contextualization" such as contexts in which media are received in everyday life. This focus has allowed for a diagnosis of the role of media in reproducing social hierarchies or inequalities and the minor tactics that enable audiences to appropriate, modify, and adapt media texts and technologies.

Thus, the initial development of "reception theory" marked a shift from concerns about ideological domination and hegemony - where television messages and media, in general, were seen as complex structures of control shaped by institutional power dynamics - to an examination of viewing practices through the lens of family dynamics and the family context of media reception. Reception studies have played a crucial role in revitalizing the research process on communicative phenomena, emphasizing the viewing experience as a foundation for understanding how audiences interpret media texts and images through their experiences.

V. Reception Theory in the Digital Environment

Technological advancements in new media and virtual communication platforms have significantly impacted the ways in which messages are received and produced. This shift has fundamentally altered the relationship between audiences and communication media, evolving from a mere reception of content to a dynamic interaction characterized by extensive participation and engagement. This evolution has redefined social and communicative practices, joining together personal, collective, and mass communication in ways that have reshaped individual and societal interaction.

The focus on reception theory has expanded to include a broader range of behaviors and impacts related to media consumption in the digital environment. This includes examining the interaction between users and technology, as well as the effects of this interaction. Researchers seek to understand the complex relationships emerging from developments in the media environment, which have broadened the conceptual horizons of message reception and significantly transformed the dynamics between audiences and communication messages.

Digital media have made a substantial part of communication and cultural content consumption visible in ways previously unseen in traditional reception models. From clicking "like" buttons and expressing feelings through emojis to sharing views on content or engaging in discussions with virtual or real friends concurrently with viewing, digital media have expanded the concept of viewing and reception. These new practices, which allow for the visible reproduction of meaning, have altered the traditional viewing contract between the audience and traditional television (Al-Iyadi, 2021).

In this context, researchers have urged a reexamination of traditional assumptions underpinning reception approaches. Kim Christian Schroder, for example, has emphasized the need for an "updated reception theory" that integrates critical and empirical perspectives to explain how different qualitative and quantitative research forms contribute to understanding the complex relationship between audiences and digital media. Similarly, Grisprud questions how empirical approaches to analyzing aesthetic goals can serve the interpretive dimensions of media environments (Christian, 1990).

This has led to calls for moving beyond the empirical tradition that characterized early reception studies towards broader research horizons that focus on users' communicative practices as part of virtual interpretive communities. The role of the user extends beyond decoding messages to interacting with the message itself and with other members of the virtual interpretive community within the digital environment.

The internet and new media are not merely technical intermediaries but interactive and complex spaces where the boundaries between public and private are blurred, framing new forms of social and cultural practices. By allowing

individuals to express their identities and personal worlds, technological platforms have enhanced identity openness and created spaces for communication through new forms of writing and blogging. The internet has thus become a space for public deliberation and discussions, forming what we call "Virtual public sphere".

Therefore, reception in the digital environment cannot be reduced to purely empirical terms. The process of using and interacting with digital media should not be confined to traditional approaches of content consumption and decoding but should encompass the analysis of users' discourse and cultural practices within the virtual context. This interaction between communication content and users in the digital space represents a form of social or identity negotiation, as each user creates and partially re-produces their social culture with heterogeneous elements (Al-Iyadi, 2018).

Michel De Certeau's concept of consumption, viewed through the lens of "tactics and strategies," (Proulx, 1994) considers reception as a form of production. He draws from military terminology to describe how individuals' consumption and innovation in daily and linguistic practices represent tactical maneuvers. Users in the media environment organize their strategies for use/consumption/daily practices based on their preferences, creating new meanings and interpretations relative to their context and conditions, thereby challenging the predetermined strategies imposed by message producers. According to De Certeau, users are equipped with cognitive and creative skills to navigate the media landscape, moving beyond mere consumption to a deeper level of ownership.

Ownership, as a concept recently employed in reception studies, is crucial for understanding the complex relationship between users and digital media technologies. Ownership involves controlling the tool or medium, integrating digital cultural elements into daily life, and producing something new in users' lives. Serge Proulx suggests that individual or group ownership of a technological medium involves three key elements: (Proulx, 2002)

- A minimum level of cognitive, intellectual, and technical mastery of the tool or technology.
- Social integration of the technology with meaningful relevance to daily life.
- The emergence of something new in the user's life.

This concept of ownership emphasizes the autonomy of the technological user or media recipient, grounded in their cognitive and technical competence. Ownership involves not only the mastery of technology but also its integration into daily life, reflected in the user's practices and actions. Finally, ownership leads to new forms of communication and cultural practices within digital communication spaces.

In renewing reception theory to study digital media, Kim Christian Schroder proposes the concept of "mediatization" as a meta-concept explaining the management of social systems (Kim Schroder 1990). Mediatization refers to the relationship between senders, the economic, political, and legal systems they operate within, and the technical medium (media) performing social and political roles. This concept can be defined by three characteristics:

- Media content and its representations.
- Increased focus on social aspects as a source of media action and influence.
- Interpretative possibilities of the media's relationship with social aspects.

VI. Issues of Reception Studies in the Digital Environment

New media, information and communication technologies have created a new communicative environment characterized by multiple media channels and varied content. This environment has blended the boundaries between senders and receivers, providing a space where all individuals can communicate, participate, broadcast, and publish. This saturation of media content has introduced several challenges for the study of media reception on various levels:

1. **Fragmentation of the Audience in the Digital Environment:** The digital environment has profoundly affected media audiences, altering their characteristics due to continuous changes linked to evolving communication tools. Audiences have transformed in terms of size, quantity, form, and interactions among their members. Previously passive receivers have become active participants and content creators on new media platforms.

In the new media environment, the audience is described as "omnipresent yet nowhere." Traditionally, audiences were people using media for specific purposes within defined time frames before switching to other activities. In contrast, the digital audience maintains a constant relationship with media, engaging in simultaneous multitasking. This shift has led some researchers to question the existence of a distinct media audience in virtual spaces (Al-Iyadi, 2021), replacing the concept of "audience" with "new media users" due to audience fragmentation, personalized usage, and dynamic virtual identities. This has resulted in a different type of audience compared to traditional media consumers.

2. **Issues in Characterizing Digital Media Audiences as Receivers/Users:** The features and the nature of media communication have significantly impacted how users receive and utilize media content. Digital media have introduced

new communication contexts and practices, leading to new media forms characterized by interactivity. Digital platforms have offered users the freedom to produce and send content, transforming them from mere receivers to active content creators. Therefore, discussing new media users in the context of emerging communication phenomena is more fitting for the virtual communication environment, where users share broadcasting and reception power and control content and its forms.

Receivers have evolved beyond being active interpreters of media content to becoming creators of this content. This has led some researchers, such as Louis Quéré, to categorize reception theory as outdated in the digital environment, advocating instead for usage models (Quéré, 1996). The new media environment focuses on users who "have more control over what and when they see," implying a greater degree of choice and interaction with media content (Livingstone, 1998).

3. Issues of Digital Hypertext Complexity: Multimedia communication has resulted in a branched, limitless form of text. Unlike traditional texts, which typically have a single author, this new form (hypertext) involves multiple sources (authors) and endpoints (readers) and takes on various forms and patterns. The new hypertext, with its multiple authors and readers, becomes a collaborative creation where the author's authority diminishes as the text evolves and diversifies. The digital media landscape is vast and unpredictable, with numerous participants engaging with the same text or document simultaneously (Bouterdine, 2003).

This poses challenges for analyzing digital texts from a reception perspective. In the digital environment, the receiver encounters a new kind of text with numerous interactive elements that require heightened sensory engagement. This text is creative, lacking clear beginnings or endings, and has a complex, evolving structure.

Conversely, some argue that the limits of reception theory are highlighted in the digital environment as it aims to clarify the ambiguous relationship between text and reader. Texts in reception studies are subjects of discussion and are not limited to written content but can include any form of text. Reception studies view cultural texts as modes of expression with meaningful form and content, examining all their complexities (Hall, 1994). Most media reception research has focused on the relationship between the receiver and the media material, with limited attention to the medium itself.

VII. Conclusion

Reception studies in traditional environments have highlighted the audience's role and interpretive creativity through the processes of message production, encoding, and decoding by active audiences. They have also emphasized the importance of the communication context—the cultural and social framework influencing how media texts are read and socially produced.

However, with the advent of new media environments, which have significantly altered various aspects of the communication process and its actors, challenges have arisen in adapting reception theory to these environments. Issues related to audience fragmentation, characterization as receivers or users, and the complexity of digital hypertexts have emerged.

While these challenges highlight the difficulties of applying reception theory in the complex, intertwined digital media environment where roles and practices are fluid, they do not necessarily refute its relevance. Reception theory can still be expanded to include the cultural and interpretive relationships between readers/users and texts in the digital realm, regardless of the form or technological medium. Reception theory remains relevant for understanding the processes of interpretation and meaning-making by users.

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